

Palo Alto Battlefield

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The Battle of Palo Alto and the Mexican-American War



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The Road To War



In the mid-19th century, having successfully thwarted European colonial designs on North America, a confident, increasingly powerful United States sought to

expand its territory. Many citizens and leaders believed that the United States had a "Manifest Destiny" to spread its government and culture across the continent and beyond. Southern states also encouraged the push westward and south as a way to spread the slave system - even if this meant acquiring Mexico's northern territories.

In 1845, when Texas accepted an offer to enter the Union, the United States also inherited a boundary dispute between two nations. The United States declared the Rio Grande to be its new southern border, while Mexico claimed that its states of Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Chihuahua met Texas further to the east and north at the Nueces River.

The United States soon attempted to force a settlement. President James K. Polk directed American forces to occupy south Texas at Corpus Christi, just north of the Nueces. Polk also sent emissary John Slidell to Mexico to seek a favorable settlement of disputed claims and the purchase of additional territories in California and New Mexico. However, in January 1846, Polk learned that an indignant Mexico had rejected Slidell's diplomatic mission.

Using Slidell's dismissal as a justification, Polk ordered Brevet Brigadier General Zachary Taylor to move U.S. troops into the disputed area. On March 8, Taylor crossed the Nueces and marched south to the Rio Grande valley. Here, he immediately set his troops to work on two forts: Fort Polk, which guarded his coastal supply base at Point Isabel; and Fort Texas, on the north bank of the Rio Grande just across from the Mexican city of Matamoros. Off-shore, Commodore David Connor disrupted Mexico's ability to supply the region; his ships blockaded the coast at the mouth of the Rio Grande.



The Mexican government was not in a strong position to respond to the challenge. Unlike the United States, in 1846, Mexico still suffered from long and costly struggles against colonialism. Lingered political, social, and economic divisions made it difficult for the central government to retain control of its vast northern territories. General Mariano Paredes' decision to use an army of reinforcements to seize the Mexican presidency further weakened defense of the north.



Mexican forces that did reach the Rio Grande also faced disadvantages. The country's turmoil and political opportunism on the part of some military leaders weakened the command structure in the field. Mexican weapons were antiquated, often left over from the wars of independence. Many soldiers sent to oppose the well-equipped volunteer army of the United States were conscripts, pressed into service against their will.

Mexico did match the United States in its determination. The young Republic had its own visions of greatness that demanded protection of existing borders. The Mexican public, dismayed by the loss of Texas, opposed further expansion by its northern neighbor. Even conscripts demonstrated a courageous dedication to defense of their homeland. Mexico prepared itself to counter invasion by the United States.

This conflict of wills pushed the two nations towards an armed clash. On April 25, 1846, Mexican forces encountered an American patrol at Rancho de Carricitos, about 25 miles upstream from Fort Texas on the north bank of the Rio Grande. In this confrontation, several U.S. soldiers were killed. President Polk, already determined to take action, called this an act of war. Congress agreed, and, on May 13, 1846, declared war.

The Battle Of Palo Alto

As leaders in the distant capitals considered formal war declarations, the two armies continued activity in the disputed territory. Mexican General Mariano Arista's "Army of the North" marched into the area between Taylor's two forts in an attempt to split American lines of supply and communication.

On May 1, General Taylor responded. Leaving 500 men with Major Jacob Brown to hold Fort Texas, Taylor led his army on a day-long march to Fort Polk to obtain supplies. These troops successfully evaded Arista's forces and reached the coast, but the Mexican general took advantage of this absence to lay siege to Fort Texas.

American forces had limited contact with the besieged fort, but the boom of distant cannons called for action. Using sailors from Commodore Conner's blockade fleet to

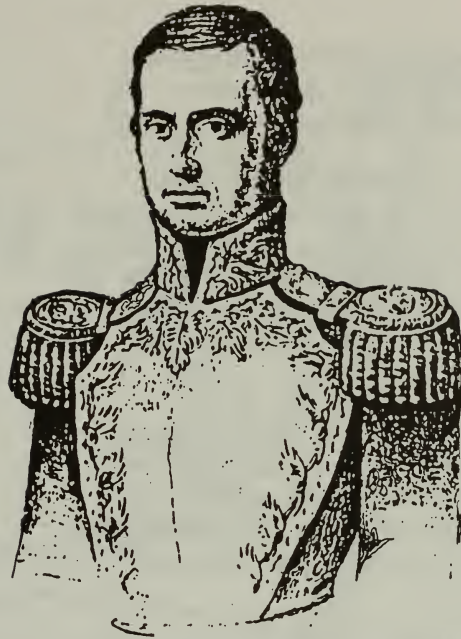
strengthen defenses at Fort Polk, Taylor prepared 2,300 troops, assembled 250 wagons full of supplies, and set out to the aid of Fort Texas.

On the morning of May 8, 1846, Taylor's troops met about 4,000 Mexican soldiers on the plains of Palo Alto, midway between Fort Polk and Fort Texas. Arista's forces formed a battle line to block the road and the U.S. forces deployed for combat in similar formation.

Despite the Mexican advantage in numbers, artillery would make the difference in the coming battle. The Mexican army boasted about twelve 4- and 8- pound cannon, but many dated back almost a century. The ammunition was also antiquated and of poor quality. The shortcomings became evident when, around 2:00 p.m., the Mexicans opened



GENERAL TAYLOR



GENERAL ARISTA

the battle with an artillery barrage from a distance of 800 yards. The projectiles, mostly solid cannon balls, approached so slowly that U.S. soldiers simply side-stepped the incoming rounds.

Newly manufactured American cannons, which fired farther and faster than the Mexican arms, would dictate the course of the battle. The United States Army employed a combination of two 18-pound siege guns, one 12-pound howitzer, and seven light, highly-mobile 6-pound smoothbores to fire a variety of shells, explosive case projectiles, and canisters of multiple shot.

According to tactics of the day, General Taylor had planned to respond to the Mexicans with an infantry bayonet charge, but he instead opened with his heavy guns. The American shelling devastated the

Mexican forces who steadfastly held their positions. The rain of metal also kept the Mexican infantry too distant to threaten with their muskets.

General Arista responded to this situation by ordering a unit of Lancers, under General Anastacio Torrejon to strike through the brush at the U.S. right flank. He aimed to change the course of battle by seizing the Americans' supply train.

The 5th U.S. Infantry repelled this cavalry charge. Marshy conditions slowed the Mexican maneuver, allowing the Americans to assume a hollow-square formation that bristled on the outside with bayonets. A close-range volley of musket fire halted the charge, but Torrejon's horsemen regrouped, swung around and attempted to strike the convoy farther to the rear. This time the 3rd U.S. Infantry took a position and, with

assistance from Major Samuel Ringgold's fast-moving field artillery, forced the Lancers back to the Mexican lines.

About 4:00 p.m. the battle briefly halted. Warm winds off the Gulf of Mexico fanned smoldering cannon wadding, igniting the thick grass and cloaking the battlefield in heavy smoke. Both sides used the lull to collect dead and wounded, fill canteens, and issue ammunition.

Each general also used the cover to realign troops. Taylor pivoted the entire American battle line forward toward the opposition. Arista made similar changes, his troops now facing into the bright, late afternoon sun.

Fighting resumed around 5:00 p.m. when Captain Charles May and horsemen of the U.S. Dragoons charged the Mexican left flank. Mexican cannons, infantry, and Torrejon's cavalry responded with heavy fire to repulse this maneuver.

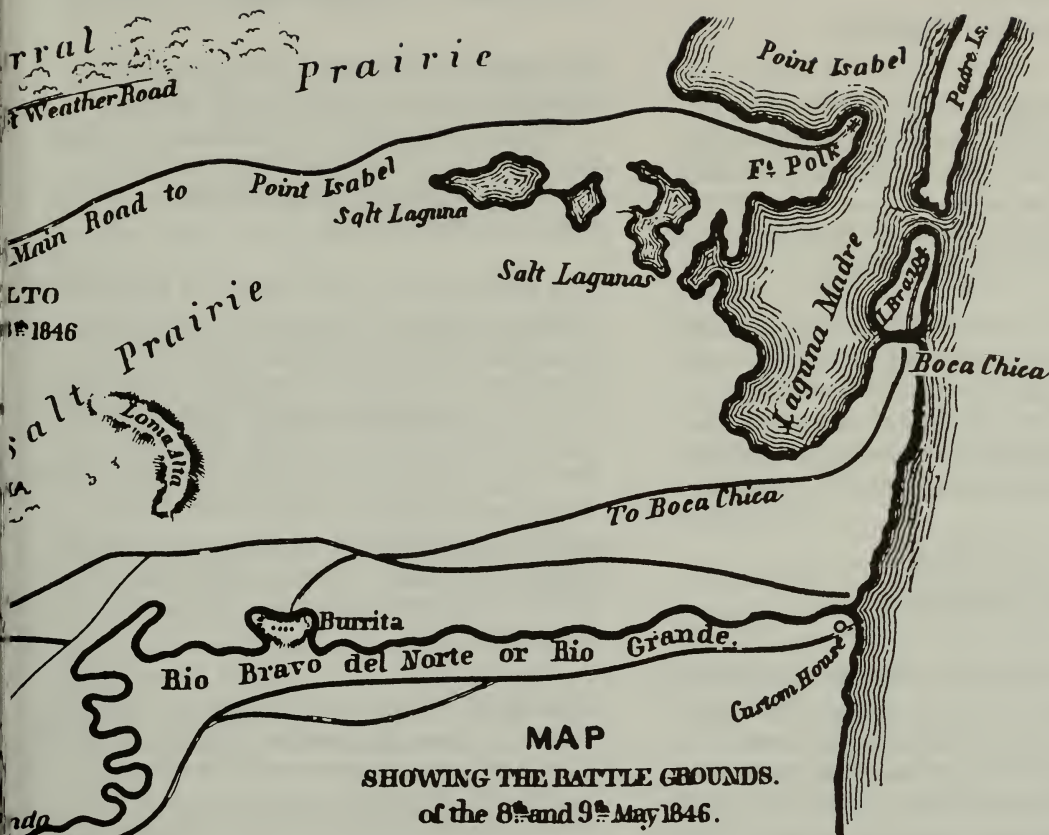
Mexican troops then reclaimed the offensive, increasing fire along the front while preparing to envelop the American line from both ends. General Torrejon's cavalry attacked the American right, but disengaged in the face of fire from 18-pound artillery and another hollow square.

Colonel Cayetano Montero's light cavalry, supported by troops of the Guarda Costa de Tampico, attempted a simultaneous assault on the U.S. left flank. Here, Captain James Duncan's battery of horse-drawn artillery broke through the smoke of battle into the midst of Montero's charge. Without hesitation, Duncan split his battery and used solid-shot, case-shot, and canister ammunition to engage two groups of Mexican soldiers.



Duncan's tactics worked. The intense, close-range cannon fire caused immediate and massive destruction. Round after round threw the Mexican troops back on the men behind them, causing the right wing to crumble and retreat.

The engagement ended around 7:00 p.m. With darkness approaching and the battle going against him, Arista elected to disengage his troops and wait for more favorable opportunities.



The Aftermath of Battle

General Taylor knew that the Battle of Palo Alto had injured but not eliminated the threat posed by Arista's "Army of the North." American casualties numbered 9 killed, 43 injured; figures that demonstrated the U.S. weapons advantage and bolstered troop morale. In contrast, estimates of Arista's losses ranged from 125-400 killed and 100-400 wounded, substantially weakening the Mexican army. Nevertheless, the Mexicans retained a numerical edge in troops and remained a dangerous force.

The Palo Alto site received fleeting attention after the battle. Mexican forces passed the night on the southern edge of the battlefield. They hurriedly tended to the dead and wounded, but bodies still littered the field when, at dawn, their last columns marched off towards Matamoros. Taylor's victorious forces camped on the field. In the morning, his troops buried the remaining Mexican dead in mass graves and took measures to protect the supply train from further attack, then marched in pursuit of Arista's army.

The Battle of Resaca de la Palma

The conflicting armies met again May 9, 1846, five miles to the south along an old bend of the Rio Grande. Mexican military leaders had prepared defenses for a second clash, choosing topography that neutralized the superior American artillery.

At the Battle of Resaca de la Palma, hand-to-hand combat and cavalry charges, not artillery, carried the day. After harsh fighting, U.S. troops routed the Mexican defenders and forced Arista's decimated troops to retreat across the Rio Grande.

Mexico Invaded on Many Fronts

The decisive American victory at Resaca de la Palma lifted the siege of Fort Texas and paved the way for U.S. invasion and occupation of the northeastern portion of Mexico, south of the Rio Grande. The U.S. "Army of Conquest" and the Mexican "Army of the North" would meet again on battlefields with names like Monterrey, La Angostura, and Buena Vista.

A larger U.S. invasion took several paths. As General Taylor advanced the first front, General Stephen Watts Kearny led another force into New Mexico and California. Finally, in 1847, an expeditionary force directed by General Winfield Scott approached by sea and landed at Veracruz on the Mexican Gulf coast. This army ultimately fought its way overland to Mexico City, causing reluctant Mexican officials to negotiate terms for peace.

Results of the War

The Mexican-American War resulted in significant loss of life for both nations. Combat and, more often, disease, claimed the lives of 13,000 American troops. Mexican civilian and military casualties climbed much higher.

The February 2, 1848, Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo expanded the United States by more than half a million square miles. Over the short term, these territorial gains added to sectional tensions that eventually exploded into the American Civil War. In the long run, however, these lands provided a westward-looking nation with riches, ports, a new frontier, and a push toward international prominence. The ultimate source of these gains has often been forgotten.

The effect of the war on Mexico was much more complex. Surrender of California and New Mexico territories and the disputed border, cost Mexico half of its territory. The trauma of defeat caused a surge of political and economic chaos that opened the weakened nation to a new series of interventions. However, the loss also united a divided nation with a desire to prevent another defeat. Against future enemies, Mexicans abandoned the in-fighting and opportunism that weakened defense in 1846 and successfully defended their borders. In time, Mexico regained confidence, increased domestic unity and developed national pride based on its achievements. Nevertheless, the American invasion has not been forgotten, and an undertone of distrust lingers in Mexico's relations with the United States.

About Your Visit

There is presently no federally-owned land at the Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic site. **All land within the authorized 3,400-acre park boundary is currently in private ownership and is not open to the public.** Visitors are requested to not enter private land.

In consultation with the public and other concerned parties, a general management plan is being prepared that will guide the National Park Service in the future development of the area for research, resource protection, and visitor use.

Private property at the junction of Highway FM 1847 (Paredes Line Road) and Highway FM 511 has been set aside as a commemorative park, developed and maintained by the Brownsville Kiwanis. **There are no facilities at this site** other than commemorative markers.

Nearby Mexican-American War Historic Sites

Rancho de Carricitos: Site of the clash between members of General Torrejon's command and Captain Seth Thornton's dragoons on April 25, 1846. A granite roadside marker, bronze plaque, and cannon have been placed here by the Texas Centennial Commission. The site is approximately 20 miles northwest of Brownsville, adjacent to U.S. Highway 281.

Resaca de la Palma Battlefield: Site of the May 9, 1846 battle between the forces of General Zachary Taylor and General Mariano Arista. A granite marker was placed by the National Society of the

Daughters of the American Revolution on Paredes Line Road, 1.15 miles north of its intersection with Boca Chica Drive in Brownsville. This site is a national historic landmark.

Fort Brown: Formerly Fort Texas, this is the place where U.S. forces endured a week-long siege by Mexican forces under the command of Generals Pedro de Ampudia and Francisco Mejia. The site is marked by an upright cannon tube, placed by the Daughters of the American Revolution. This site is a national historic landmark.

Fort Polk: The site of the supply depot, established by General Zachary Taylor in late March 1846, was located on Point Isabel near the historic lighthouse.

Brazos Santiago Depot: A supply depot was established about three miles from Fort Polk on the south side of Brazos Santiago Pass. This site is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Casa Mata: In the city of Matamoros, Mexico, and established in 1844, the Casa Mata was a strong fortress within the ring of fortifications that surrounded the city for eight decades. The Casa Mata has been restored and developed as an historic site and regional museum.



The Department of the Interior

As the nation's principle conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public land and natural and cultural resources. This duty includes activities to foster the wise use of our land and water resources, to protect our fish and wildlife, to preserve the environment and cultural value of our national parks and historic places, and to provide for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The department also encourages stewardship and citizen responsibility and participation in the care of public lands.

The National Park Service

The National Park Service was established in 1916 as the principal preservation agency of the United States. Today, the National Park Service has responsibility for over 360 federal park areas.

The national parks, monuments, historic sites, and recreation areas are public lands and properties that are managed to make them available both today and for future generations. Providing simultaneously for use and protection is a challenging task that is made even more so by the increasing number of visitors to each park every year.

National parks offer a wide range of activities for visitors. Activities vary from park to park, depending on the kind of resources available. These may include camping, hiking and historic tours, and interpretive walks, talks, and demonstrations.

In the coming years, a variety of such services will emerge for Palo Alto Battlefield. The park will develop publications about the site, offer school programs, and will emerge as a national resource for learning about the respective histories of two great nations.

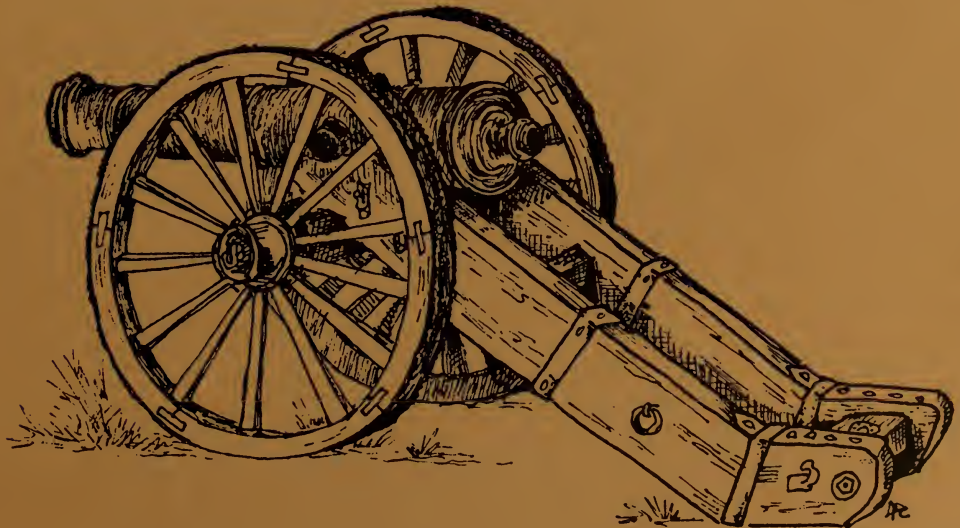
Park Purpose

On June 23, 1992, an Act of Congress authorized the creation of the Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site as a unit of the National Park Service. This law calls for interpretation of the Battle of Palo Alto and the Mexican-American War, acquainting visitors with Mexican and American historical perspectives. Presentations will emphasize the political, diplomatic military and social causes and consequences of these events.

As the first battlefield of the Mexican-American War, Palo Alto represents a rupture of relations between neighboring countries that has not yet healed. As a national park that recalls that war, Palo Alto Battlefield serves as a reminder that respect and understanding – not war – is the legacy toward which both nations must strive.

Additional Information

For further information about the park or how to participate in the development of the site's general management plan/development concept plan, you may contact the park superintendent at the temporary park administrative office by writing or calling: Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site, 1335 East Washington Street, P.O. Drawer 1832, Brownsville, TX 78522. Telephone (210) 548-2788



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